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The Impact of the Net on Teaching and Research in Political Science: a Tasmanian Case Study

William Bostock
School of Government
University of Tasmania

William Bostock Dr. William Bostock was born in Sydney and has studied at the following universities: Monash, Reading, Tasmania and Lumiere-Lyon. His current position is Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Tasmania where he has specialised in Ethnic Politics and Comparative Politics.

Description

This paper considers the place of the discipline of Political Science in the modern educational milieu of corporatised universities and finds indications that its position is in slight decline. The growing importance of the Net is indirectly related to this process but also offers a way back: in teaching delivery, in research input and in the publication of research results. The School of Government in the University of Tasmania provides a case study of response to the opportunities and risks that come with use of the Net.

TopPresentation

Political Science is a classical discipline-- Aristotle called it the "queen of the sciences" and the tradition he started was followed in Europe by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau and there is also a long tradition in China with Confucius, Lao Tzu, Han Fe Tzu, and Chu Hsi, up to the present time. Its subdisciplines include, as well as political thought, international relations, comparative politics, political sociology and public administration, but how is the teaching and research of it responding to the digital revolution that has followed the arrival of the Net?

Like other classical disciplines such as Ancient Civilisations, History, the languages, Mathematics and Physics, it is in decline in strength in Australian universities including the Australian National University ("...(I)t would be no exaggeration

to say that the work of the Department of Political Science in 1998 was severely disrupted ...and the consequent requirement to reduce staff numbers..." (ANU Faculty of Arts, 1998: 1), most other Australian universities, and the University of Tasmania, as it also is in other countries. The cause of this decline is a complex process of social, political, economic and cultural transformation: factors that have been proposed are the decline of the public sector, privatisation, the de-emphasising of ideology, political convergence of the major parties, the change from citizen to consumer, the growth of student consumerism "...the most pressing threat to the traditional subject of university education" (Readings, 1996: 48), and the corporatisation of higher education. The digital revolution is not a direct cause of this process, but increased use of the Net does offer a way back to a more central place among university offerings.

TopCourse Delivery

The University of Tasmania has already a considerable range of courses partially distributed electronically in the distance mode and some multicampus offerings by videolink, and it encourages the enhancement of the traditional teaching mode with Net and email. However, the newer disciplines such as Media Studies and Tourism are gaining in popularity in comparison with Political Science, much as Environmental Studies and Antarctic Studies are with the classical sciences, for example. Through the Internet, but with restricted access, the School of Government provides course outlines, lecture notes and/or summaries, and past examination papers. Students are encouraged to use email to communicate with academic staff and the administration and likewise staff to use email (though not all students regularly read their email), PowerPoint and multimedia. At the course delivery end, Political Science and Public Policy in the School of Government are being enhanced electronically, but a complete online course is still not available. The posting of published source documents on the Net involves problems of copyright that have yet to be resolved.

The federal government in Australia is committed to a corporatist model of education and the creation of a national marketplace for education as a fundamental policy aim (DETYA, 1998). The ease of teaching and learning through the distributive technology of the Net is enabling many mainland universities, such as New England, Deakin, Murdoch, Southern Queensland and the Northern Territory, and also overseas

universities, to take many potential students from the University of Tasmania, and therefore use of the Net for delivery is an imperative in this environment.

TopResearch Input

Students of Political Science classically based their research on printed documents such as books, journals and newspapers and interviews. Unfortunately the supply of printed documents is diminishing because of cost and delay, but the Net is the location of an explosion of information: at present there are more than two billion publicly accessible pages which could become four billion by February 2001 (Golson, 2000). Many of these are official sites of governments and government agencies, and other official and semi-official organisations. The Tasmanian School of Government provides an extensive list of internet resources (<http://www.utas.edu.au/government/>) and students are extensively using these. But are there any impediments in the way of use of the Net by undergraduates?

There are, and the first is quality and reliability. The Net is often characterised as ether, (the outer region of space) or sky, where messages are skywritten (Harnad, 1997), or an ocean, as implied in the name of the browser Netscape Navigator or the term to surf. One could also propose the metaphor of the street market, where anyone can put anything for sale, swap or giveaway, genuine article or otherwise, with no questions asked and no guarantees available. The Net allows anyone to post a publication, but the academic process requires information based on reliable evidence. The presence of much unreliable information on the Net therefore makes its use in essay and thesis writing problematic. Students can be advised to treat the Net with caution, looking for some clues as to provenance, as in an "edu" in the address indicating a connection with an educational institution, though some institutions have exercised very strict control of their URL while others much less so. The Net's vastness offers great opportunity but the unreliability and the transitory nature of much of its contents make it very risky as to its suitability as a source for students. But its existence and the mighty potential power of its impact indicate that, in the view of some, that the demise of the print media is inevitable (Odlyzko, 1995).

The second difficulty confronting students of Political Science in their use of the Net is access to archives. The information explosion engendered by the electronic age has vastly increased the difficulties of archiving documents vital for the operation of government, law, business and academia, so that students are not the only group to encounter this problem.

The problems confronting electronic archiving (technical, conceptual and organizational) are great, but solutions to these problems are well in progress though far from complete. The problem with digital materials is their short durability and in fact many significant losses have already occurred including the first electronic mail message of 1964, part of the U.S. census of 1960, and the satellite observations of Brazil taken in the 1970s (Task Force, 1996:2). The conceptual problem of deciding which documents to archive is the classical one of appraisal and selection. The inclusion of government records may seem surprising, but, for example, the speeches of Australian Federal ministers outside parliament are regularly removed from the Internet after a short period. In comparison, the 40 million email messages of the Clinton Administration will, by law, go to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) (Thibodeau, 1999:1).

Most of the world's 200 or so states are currently digitising all legislation and law reports and many official bodies have been charged with this responsibility, so that, as far as political scientists concerned with legislation are concerned, help is at hand.
TopResearch Output

At the research end, Political Science has not yet fully come to terms with the potential of the Net to publish research findings, or to find a way to guide its students in safely exploiting the research material potential. Political Science has like other disciplines operated on the criterion of the publication of research findings through the printed journal and to a lesser extent books and occasional papers so that after formal qualification, publication in prestigious printed journals and by established publishing houses has a very gatekeeper function of controlling entry into academia.

The prestigious journals are selective: many have rejection rates of 90 per cent (Getz, 1997), and this is accepted as normal, but the problem in the

performance of this function is that of "severe restriction" because of time and cost (Edmonds, 2000). As a result, scholars, particularly those who are young and seeking to enter academia, can feel great frustration. Individuals can be confronted with problems of delay and even non-response as well as costs such as purchase of printed journals, postage, sometimes administration fees, and physical access to libraries. Moreover, it has been alleged that minority viewpoints can be suppressed by prevailing editorships and publishing authorities (Manne, 2000: 18).

The Net might have seemed, in the early days of its growth since 1990, to be the perfect location for the published production of the academic process, but with some notable exceptions, this has not proven to be the case. A considerable number of existing prestigious scholarly print journals are being produced in electronic version, and are available by subscription as publishing houses are becoming concerned about the transition to electronic format and are seeking ways to maintain their income flow in the new format (McKnight and Bailey, 1995).

In certain fields, academics have come to recognize electronic journals as valid vehicles of scholarly discourse: high energy physics and electronic communication are two examples (Harrison and Stephen, 1995), but in most of the classical fields, such as Political Science, electronic journals have "not yet been accepted as legitimate publication outlets by the scholarly communities" (Kling and Covi, 1995: 1). The fact that many electronic journals have failed the basic test of survival has contributed to the "lack of acceptance as a means of professional and scholarly communication" (Jul, 1992). Postgraduates in the School of Government of the University of Tasmania have been able to publish in both print journals such as The Australian Journal of Political Science but also electronic journals such as The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution (<http://www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/about.htm>), and the use of this second medium is sure to grow.

TopIs academic quality in the present postmodern period just in the eye of the beholder? The answer to this question is negative as there is common agreement that it is a matter of thoroughness of documentation of evidence, acknowledgment of sources, soundness of logic, and reliability of conclusions. One system of assuring quality is often called peer review, that is, review by equals on an anonymous

basis but this system creates bottlenecks of delay. Many commentators believe that review is a necessary component in the process of assuring quality, and must be part of the production of an electronic journal which seeks recognition (Harnad, 1997).

The creation of associations of peer-reviewed electronic journals in specific areas is a development likely to advance the reputation of quality and such bodies that can set out criteria for membership have been and thereby offering a guarantee of quality (APREJR 2000).

An interesting variation on the peer-review process is the post-publication review whereby articles are published as received and then voted on for publication in a more prestigious electronic archive (Nadasdy, 1997).

Recognition by an official body which is part of government such as the Higher Education Funding Council of England (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>) or similar bodies in other countries, as is Antepodium, a New Zealand electronic journal of world affairs (<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/atp/frmain.html>), is an indicator of quality and therefore is recognised for the purposes of recognised research output.

The problem of discontinuity could be the greatest disincentive to an academic contemplating submission of his/her valuable research findings to an electronic journal, or in other words, the "fear of transience" (Jul, 1992: 3). A printed document is expensive to produce but the printed records lasts: an electronic document is cheap to produce but there is a cost to maintain it. Social Science Publication Papers

[http://www.sspp.ne/acrhive/papers/3\(2\)editoris.html](http://www.sspp.ne/acrhive/papers/3(2)editoris.html) costs US\$225 per year to produce and maintain, a cost shared among its editors (from the Editors Volume 3, Issue 2). A strong indicator of continuity (and quality) is the official recognition of an educational institution, such as for Language Culture and Society.

(<http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/Journal.html>), which is produced by staff of the University of Tasmania. The cost of production can be reduced by the use of text editing software which will avoid the "tedious, time consuming and error prone" process of manual HTML markups (Sosteric, 1999) and therefore aid in ensuring continuity.

Multi-lingual publishing is another proven method of enhancing the visibility of the products of research. Mots Pluriels

(<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP.html>) is a bilingual French/English journal of politics and literature which meets the criteria mentioned: its Editorial Board is a group of international academics, and it also has a panel of recognised Editorial Consultants. It has the official endorsement of the University of Western Australia, and it is archived by the Australian National Library and is publicly available in the PANDORA Archive.

TopProblems of visibility are also caused by the absence of integrated cataloguing, indexing and abstracting services for electronic publication (Jul, 1992), but when these problems are solved, the visibility of an article in an electronic journal will be exponentially geared.

The University of Tasmania Library, to take one institutional example, has licensed access to over 2500 electronic journals which are listed on the Library's electronic journals subscription page but unfortunately

"We have a great deal of difficulty finding out which issues of which journals are available through our databases and sites. Lists provided by the vendors are often inaccurate and titles are often removed without notice" (Morris Miller Library, (University of Tasmania), 2000: 1).

Discontinuity is therefore a major factor militating against the building of trust and confidence necessary for the sustaining of Political Science publications on the Net, as it is for other disciplines, and thereby playing an important role within the academic process.

A major help in advancing their acceptance is the possibility of hyperlinking, where hypertext links are provided in an article to works cited in the same article, a quantum leap forward from the traditional reference lists of print articles, though the transition to clickable links is still fraught with social, commercial and legal difficulties, not to mention the conceptual one of relevance (Hitchcock, Quek, Carr, Hall, Witbrock and Tarr, 1998).

TopConclusion

Academic Political Science, like most of the classical disciples, is responding with some difficulty to the new educational environment.

At the delivery end, it is now competing as a discipline in an educational marketplace as each individual school is also. It is therefore imperative to fully exploit the potentiality of the Net to deliver courses to students.

At the research end, its once plentiful supply of printed documents is drying up but the Net offers an abundance of riches, free for the taking, but buried under mountains of highly irrelevant and/or unsuitable material. For the publication of research findings, there is again the problem of a diminishing range of outlets for printed output, but the Net provides some avenues to explore. Some disciplines such as high energy physics have fully embraced the Net but Political Science, as a discipline, is holding back for some reasons that are understandable.

The discipline of Political Science in the University of Tasmania, which is part of the School of Government, provides a typical case study exemplifying the opportunities, the risks and the imperatives, created by the arrival of the Net. Sound instruction in and application of guidelines as to quality and continuity in the use of the Net will minimise the amount of wasted effort in the process of transition to the electronic age, which is inevitable.

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